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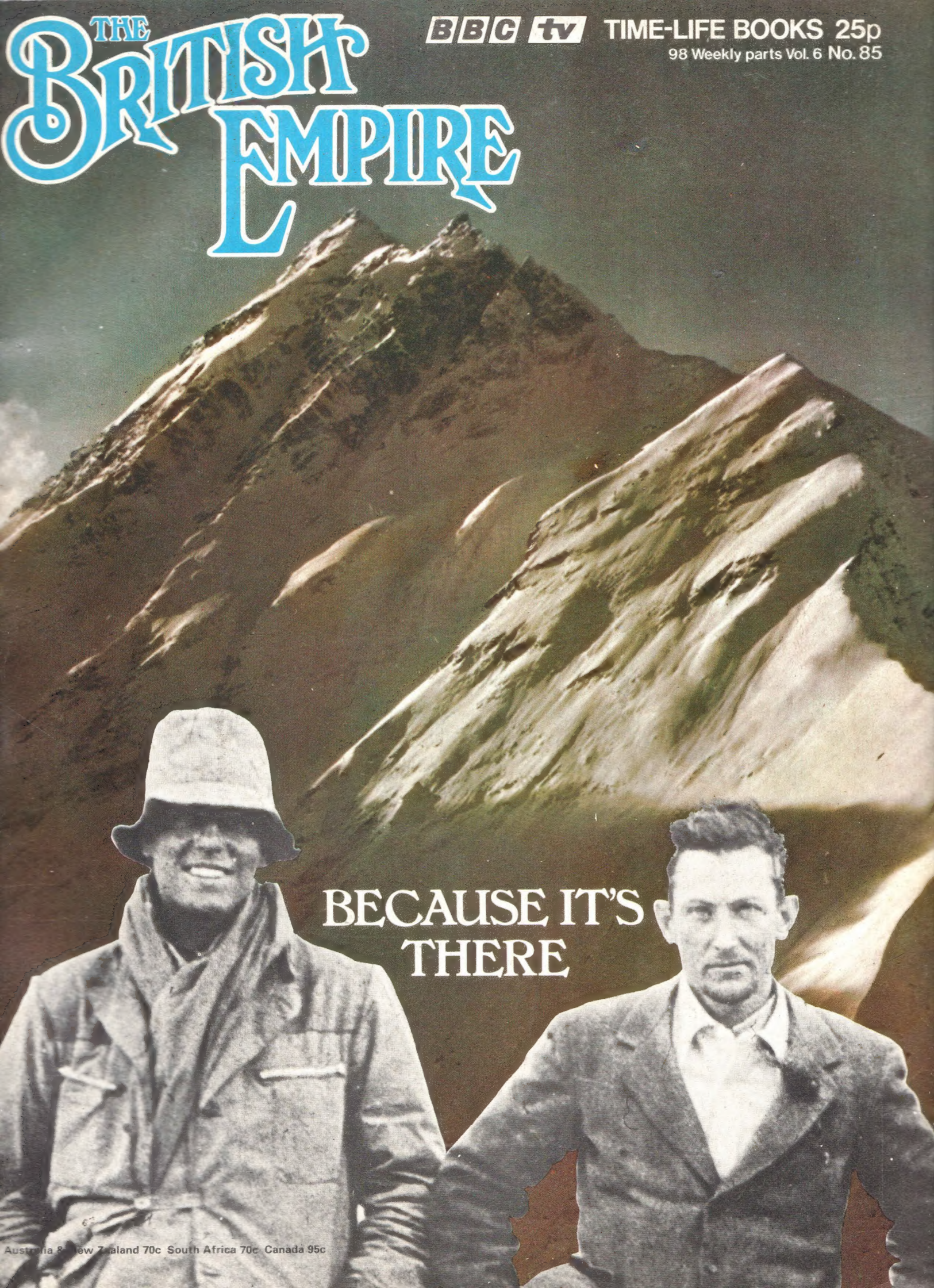

BECAUSE IT'S THERE

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CONTENTS

2353. Because It's There
The 19th-Century background to the British habit of looking for and exploring the most remote areas of the world.

2362. Picture Essay: Assault on Everest
The tragic effort to scale Mount Everest in 1924 which resulted in the disappearance of Irving and Mallory, as seen through the lens of photographer, Captain John Noel.

2374. The Greatest Conquests
The rugged individualism of seafarer Sir Francis Chichester compared with the teamwork that took the Union Jack to the top of Everest.

Cover: The ill-fated Irving and Mallory, leaders of the 1924 Everest Expedition, are superimposed against the giant mountain that was to take their lives.

BECAUSE IT'S THERE

Britain has been a land of explorers and adventurers since the days of the first Elizabeth. It was daring men in search of fresh horizons who created the Empire in the first place. And the Empire provided later generations, still thirsting for wilder shores and lonelier uplands, with a world-wide obstacle-course filled with romantic, dangerous and tantalizing challenges.

For some, the objectives were practical: to find a precious mineral, a new route across a continent, a rich island in the sea. For many, the challenge itself was the goal. To penetrate an untrodden jungle, cross a desert, circumnavigate the globe or conquer a mountain peak – simply "because it's there," in the words of George Leigh Mallory – was reward enough.

By Timothy S. Green

What prompts a man like Sir Francis Chichester at the age of 70, already battered by thousands of miles of lone ocean-voyaging, to set off once again to compete in yet another solo transatlantic yacht race? "Well why not?" said Chichester, as he prepared *Gipsy Moth V* for the 1972 Atlantic Race. "A man must do something. Restlessness was born in me . . . and time! time! time! was running on. How could I find one more satisfying venture?" Even if he did not win, he felt the race provided him with "my own little private challenge."

Those words, "my own little private challenge," from a man who has become more of a legend through his adventuring than any other in this century, speak really for that special brand of Englishman who never seems happier than when he is pitting himself against stormy oceans, burning deserts or ice-capped mountains. The yearning to go where no man has gone before, in the pure spirit of adventure, may not be an exclusively British quality. But in the last hundred years most of the great adventurers, the men who give their yearning practical expression, with a few notable exceptions, like the New Zealander, Edmund Hillary, have been Englishmen – men like George Leigh Mallory and Eric Shipton, who tried again and again to conquer Everest, or Charles Doughty, Bertram Thomas and Wilfred Thesiger, who pitted themselves against the deserts of Arabia.

That England produced so many adventurers may be partly explained by the special conditions that prevailed under the Empire. Several of them – Thesiger, Shipton and Francis Younghusband – who crossed the Gobi Desert and the Himalayas – were born and brought up overseas, where their parents occupied some post within the Empire. As young boys they grew up in the wilds of Africa or on tea plantations in Ceylon. When they were eight or nine they were shipped back to public schools in England which, for all of them, meant purgatory. They spent their English schooldays dreaming of the wide-open spaces they had left behind and vowing to return at the first opportunity.

The era of the lone adventurer going off because he wanted to prove himself or just to satisfy his curiosity started little more than a century ago. While the British were, of course, no newcomers to voyaging to the ends of the earth, their journeys up to that time had been primarily official exploration, military surveys or commercial ventures. By the mid-19th Century, however, most of the big discoveries, like New Zealand or Australia, had been made, the British had to look for new horizons. For them, adventure became an end in itself.

The beginning of the age can almost be pinpointed. In 1854 Francis Galton, Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society, published a delightful little book, *The Art of Travel*, which advised on everything from how to hire a mule to how much salt and pepper a black servant might need on a six-month trek. It became the bible of a new generation of Victorian travellers.

Of all the countries tackled by British explorers, Arabia held the greatest fascination. Although Richard Burton penetrated to the forbidden heart of Mecca in 1853 disguised as a Muslim pilgrim, Arabia remained for almost another century largely a mysterious and unknown land. Both the temperament of its people and the climate of its deserts were hostile to any incursion by Christian Europeans. But those very barriers made Arabia all the more fascinating; a forbidden land is always tempting.

For a handful of Englishmen the lure of Arabia became irresistible. They journeyed to its interior, often travelling in great secrecy, disguised as Bedouins. None went on official expeditions or government missions; they travelled alone to satisfy their own intense curiosity. For four of these men, Charles Doughty, Bertram Thomas, H. St. John Philby and Wilfred Thesiger, their Arabian journeys became almost a personal crusade.

The pioneer was Charles Montague Doughty, the son of a Suffolk clergyman, who spent from the autumn of 1876 until the summer of 1878 wandering through Arabia. In many ways Doughty was the archetype of the lone adventurer. He was a shy, nervous man, totally caught up in his own world. At Cambridge he became interested in geology and archaeology. He then wandered around Europe and the Middle East in the leisurely, amateur fashion of a Victorian gentleman.

Eventually, he ended up in Damascus, where his curiosity was roused by reports of rock cities in Arabia, along the route taken by the annual Haj pilgrimage to Mecca. Doughty resolved to be the first European to find them. He decided to join in the annual pilgrimage, but to stop off *en route* once he reached the most interesting sights. Initially, he sought the support of the British Consul in Damascus and of the Royal Geographical Society in London. Both declined to help him. The Consul, in fact, said that if Doughty persisted in going: "He had as much regard for me . . . as of his old hat."

Not discouraged, Doughty determined to go on his own, without official sanction and at his own expense. His chief difficulty was to find a way of attaching himself to the Haj caravan that left Damascus late every autumn for Mecca. Eventually, he encountered a friendly Persian pilgrim who agreed, for £10, to let him join the Persian contingent. So, on the afternoon of November 10, 1876, Doughty set out from Damascus riding on a mule, "clothed as a Syrian of simple fortune." He took with him merely a small tent, a couple of camel bags stuffed with clothes, a carbine, a revolver, an aneroid barometer, a pocket sextant and a few Turkish gold coins worth about £30.

His plan was to stay with the vast Haj caravan as far as Medain Salih, about 400 miles north of Mecca. Then he proposed to wander off on his own to study the ancient ruins, trusting to traditional Bedouin hospitality for food and shelter. He had taken along with him a supply of smallpox vaccine and an assortment of other drugs which he hoped he might sell to eke out his meagre resources. He adopted an Arab name, Khalil, but, unlike Richard Burton before him, did not profess to be a Muslim. Although he found it easier to pass himself off as an Arab, he never denied that he was a Christian when the question was put directly to him.

Doughty detached himself from the caravan at Medain Salih, where the local ruler grudgingly gave him a room in the fort. Next day the ruler promised him a guide for several visits to the local ruins, in return for his carbine. The guide, however, rarely showed up. When

Doughty protested, the sheikh hit him in the face with a shoe. Doughty suffered this, and many other indignities, with calm. As he wrote afterwards, "I could never escape from this place if I fought them with pistol for pistol, life to life . . . far better to make nothing of this murderous course."

Despite such discomforts, Doughty was gradually caught up in the Bedouin way of life; what had started merely as a foray to copy inscriptions in an ancient city became a passion to explore Arabia and its customs fully. When the opportunity arose after a month or two to rejoin the Haj pilgrimage on its return journey from Mecca, he turned it down.

Instead, he bought a camel – a rather sick one as it turned out – for the modest sum of £5 10s., and set off eastwards with a vague notion that he might end up on the shores of the Persian Gulf, 1,000 miles away. For almost 18 months he wandered from village to village, sometimes welcomed, sometimes sent hastily and almost forcibly on his way when he was discovered to be a *Nasreny* – a Christian.

The heat, boils and intestinal troubles plagued him. Water was often not only in short supply, but foul to drink. It was "commonly thick and ill-smelling in the wet sand, and putrefying with rotten fibres of plants and urea of the nomads' cattle," he recalled. "Sooner than drink their water I often suffered thirst and oft passed the nights half sleepless."

The Bedouins among whom he wandered were constantly puzzled as to what brought him there. "Tell us by Ullah [allah], Khalil, art thou not come to spy out the country?" they asked. "For there will no man take upon himself immense fatigue for naught. Khalil, say it once, what thy purpose is? Art thou some banished man? Comest thou of thine own will or have others sent thee hither?"

Doughty replied simply that he was a *saiehh*, a walker about the world, or God's

The Lure of Far Away

Armchair travellers not only adventured vicariously by reading the memoirs of the great explorers, but turned eagerly to such books as *The Art of Travel* by Francis Galton, published in 1854 from which these excerpts come:

"*Qualifications for a Traveller.* If you have health, a great craving for adventure, at least a moderate fortune, and can set your heart on a definite object, which old travellers do not think impracticable, then – travel by all means. . . . If you have not independent means, you may still turn travelling to excellent account; for experience shows it often leads to promotion, nay, some men support themselves by travel. They explore pasture land in Australia, they hunt for ivory in Africa, they collect specimens of natural history for sale, or they wander as artists.

Reputed Dangers of Travel. A young man of good constitution, who is bound on an enterprise sanctioned by experienced travellers, does not run very great risks. . . . Savages rarely murder newcomers; they fear their guns, and have a superstitious awe of the white man's power; they require time to discover that he is not very different to themselves, and easily to be made away with. Ordinary fevers are seldom fatal to the sound and elastic constitution of youth.

At Night, to Dispose of Guns. A gun is a very awkward thing to dispose of at night. It has occurred more than once that a native servant has crept up, drawn away the gun of his sleeping master, and shot him dead. The following appears to me an excellent plan: – "When getting sleepy, you return your rifle between your legs, roll over and go to sleep. Some people may think this is a queer place for a rifle; but on the contrary, it is the position of all others where utility and comfort are most combined. The butt rests on the arm, and serves as a pillow for the head; the muzzle points between the knees, and the arms encircle the lock and breech so that you have a smooth pillow . . ."

"How to sleep with your gun."

Makeshift Life-belt. – A moderately effective life-belt may be made of holland, ticking, canvas, or similar materials in the following manner, and might be used with advantage by the crew of a vessel . . . who are about to swim for their lives: – Cut out two complete rings, of 16 inches outer diameter and 8 inches inner diameter; sew these together along both edges . . . add strong shoulder-straps . . . and, lastly, sew into it a long narrow tube, made out of a strip of the same material as the belt. At the mouth of this, a bit of wood, an inch long, with a hole bored down its middle, should be inserted as a mouthpiece. Through this tube, the belt can be re-inflated by the swimmer . . . as often as may be necessary . . .

Swimming with Horses. – In crossing a deep river, with a horse . . . drive him in; or even lead him along a steep bank, push him sideways, suddenly into the water; having fairly started him, jump in yourself, seize his tail, and let him tow you across. If he turns his head with the intention of changing his course, splash water in his face with your right or left hand, as the case may be."

wanderer. On foot and by camel Doughty wandered over much of Arabia. His peregrinations took him as far east as Ha'il and Buraydah in the heart of the Arabian peninsula and finally south almost to Mecca itself. By the time he emerged at the port of Jeddah, on the Red Sea coast, in the summer of 1878, he was a sorry figure. "The tunic was rent on my back," he wrote later, "my mantle was old and torn; the hair was grown down under my kerchief to the shoulders, and the beard fallen and unkempt. I had blood-shot eyes, half blinded, and the scorched skin was cracked to the quick upon my face."

He had covered almost 3,000 miles in his 21 months of solitary adventuring and learned more of Arabia than any European before him. Eventually, back in England, he wrote of all that he had seen in a monumental 1,000-page book, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, later described by T.E. Lawrence as a "Bible of its kind."

Doughty's journeys, however, had been concentrated in the north-west of Arabia. The challenge that remained was the great waste of sand that sweeps almost 900 miles south-east from the Persian Gulf to Yemen. The Arabs call it Rub'Al Khali: the Empty Quarter. No European had ever ventured across it. To the desert traveller, therefore, it became as challenging as the South Pole for Polar explorers or Everest for a mountaineer.

Ultimately, two men crossed it within a year of each other: Bertram Thomas, from Salala in the south to Doha in the Persian Gulf sheikdom of Qatar, in the winter of 1930–31; and H. St. John Philby, heading south from the Gulf the following year. For both, the crossing of the sands of the Empty Quarter was the fulfilment of a lifetime's love of Arabia. As Bertram Thomas put it, "To have laboured in Arabia is to have tasted inevitably of her seduction. The remote recesses of the earth, Arctic and Antarctic, the sources of the Amazon, and the vast inner spaces of Asia and Africa have one by one yielded their secrets to

Wilfred Thesiger (right), in search of "the peace that comes with solitude," crossed the Empty Quarter of Saudi Arabia disguised as an Arab, taking photos like this *en route*.

man's curiosity until, by a strange chance, the Rub'Al Khali remained almost the last considerable *terra incognita*."

Thomas determined to penetrate it while serving as the Chief Adviser to the Sultan of Muscat and Oman. He made his preparations in great secrecy, because he knew that neither the British, nor King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia, was likely to sanction such an enterprise by a Christian. "So," he noted, "my journeys were heralded only by my disappearances, paid for by myself and executed under my own auspices."

Finally, all was ready. One night early in October, 1930, he slipped out of Muscat aboard a British oil-tanker and, down the coast, transferred to an Arab *dhow* which put him ashore, unheralded, at Salala. His initial difficulty was to recruit a reliable Bedouin guide. Eventually, he made an ally of a desert Bedouin, Sheikh Salih Bin Kalut. At first Salih said that the journey proposed by Thomas was "impossible." No white man or Christian had ever been there. But Thomas, with that determination typical of English travellers bent upon achieving some long-cherished goal, was not put off. After three days of arguing, Salih agreed to arrange everything in return for the promise of a camel, a rifle and a fine new robe. So they left Salala early in December, 1930, crossed the coastal mountains and within ten days were moving out into the desert sands.

Before him Thomas saw "a vast ocean of billowing sands, here tilted into frowning heights . . . dunes of all sizes, unsymmetrical in relation to one another but with the exquisite roundness of a girl's breasts, rise tier upon tier like a mighty mountain system."

He spent Christmas Day, 1930, making his way over the dunes. "Our camels climbed arduously to knife-edge summits and slithered knee-deep down precipitous slopes. Here and there we turned back for very fear and tried a better way, and all dismounted to scrabble with our hands in the soft slopes to make a path for the camels to climb." Christmas dinner that evening was a thin soup made from brackish water from a desert well and a tin of baked beans.

Frequently, when they came to the wells that were their lifeline across the

Charles Doughty, author of *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, joined a Haj pilgrimage to Mecca "clothed as a Syrian of simple fortune." He said he was a Christian Arab named Khalil.

desert, Thomas found the water too nauseating to drink. Whenever possible he drank camel's milk instead. But they pressed forward, averaging about 15 miles a day, and, in early February, after almost 60 days on the march – 40 of them in the desert itself – they came at last to the low range of coastal hills near the little fort of Doha, in Qatar, on the Persian Gulf. "We were arriving," Thomas wrote in *Arabia Felix*. "The Bedouin moved forward at a sharp pace, chanting the water chants. Our thirsty camels pricked up their ears with eager knowingness. The last sandhill was left behind . . . half an hour later we entered the walls of the fort. The Rub'Al Khali had been crossed."

Although the Empty Quarter had been conquered, its secret magnetism was not lost. Just as Everest, once climbed, still attracts generations of mountaineers bent on seeking the summit by ever more tortuous routes, so these sands remain the ultimate test of the desert traveller.

St. John Philby soon followed Thomas, but thereafter no European ventured to the interior for 15 years. Thomas's account of his journey, however, was read eagerly by a young Oxford undergraduate, Wilfred Thesiger. And it was Thesiger who finally achieved, in the winters of 1946–47 and 1948–49, the two longest and most difficult crossings of the Empty Quarter. Thesiger's Arabian travels, which he described so eloquently in *Arabian Sands*, were the climax to a remarkable career (which still continues) of adventure. He is today widely regarded as Britain's greatest living explorer. His life has been an unceasing search, always on foot, round Arabia, Africa and much of Asia for those last havens of tranquillity, forgotten or by-passed in the rush of the 20th Century. His own estimate is that he has walked over 40,000 miles, almost twice round the world. When persistent pain in his knee joints forced him to have a cartilage operation a few years ago, the surgeon told him afterwards: "You've simply worn out your knee joints with walking."

Thesiger is the classic example of an English adventurer who was born abroad, surrounded by the trappings of Empire, was sent back to school in England, and then spent the rest of his life trying to recapture the memories of his youth. He was born in 1910 in Ethiopia, where his father, a brother of Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy of India, was British Minister. Until he was nine Thesiger lived in the adult, aristocratic world of the British mission in Addis Ababa. Whenever he went out riding in the wild Ethiopian countryside he was flanked by an escort of lancers. And one of his earliest memories is of going to India to visit his uncle, the Viceroy. To be sent back to school in England after such an upbringing was misery; throughout his schooldays his sole dream was to escape to a life of adventure in Africa.

While he was at Oxford he was invited back to Ethiopia for the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1930. He used the opportunity to mount a small expedition afterwards down to the fringes of the dangerous Danakil country between Addis Ababa and French Somaliland. Officials who tried to discourage him by pleading that it would be an unhappy sequel to the coronation if he were murdered by the Danakil, were brushed aside. "I want to go off on my own," he replied. Finally, permission was granted. "All my wildest dreams seem to be coming true," he said in a letter home as he prepared his little caravan. The journey became "the most decisive month of my

life," he acknowledged later. "For a month I travelled in an arid, hostile land. I was alone, there was no one whom I could consult; if I met with trouble from the tribes I could get no help; if I were sick there was no one to doctor me. Men trusted me and obeyed my orders; I was responsible for their safety. I was often tired and thirsty, sometimes frightened and lonely, but I tasted . . . a way of life from which there could be no recall."

Thesiger had to return to England, but the moment he had finished at Oxford, he was back in Danakil country again, on a longer trek to find the source of the Awash River. Then he joined the Sudan Political Service, where he was appointed to the remote province of Darfur. He and the local District Commissioner were the only Englishmen in 50,000 square miles. The job provided him with an ideal springboard for adventure. He became a hunter of distinction, almost always tracking animals on foot. "I was charged sixteen times by a lion," he recalled. Among his friends in the Sudan his lion-hunting feats became legendary. "He was so tough," said one of them, "that he simply ran after the lion till it gave in from sheer exhaustion. He could outrun it."

He also learned to ride camels and embarked on lengthy journeys, not only through the deserts of the Sudan, but to the Tibesti Mountains of Chad (then French Equatorial Africa). Those journeys nourished his love of the desert. "Hour after hour, day after day, we moved forward and nothing changed," he wrote, "the desert met the empty sky always the same distance ahead of us. Time and space were one. Round us was a silence in which only the winds played and a cleanness which was infinitely remote from the world of men."

From the wastes of the Sudan to the sands of the Empty Quarter of Arabia was a natural step. And in the winter of 1946 Thesiger was poised on the brink of the sands, planning, like Bertram Thomas before him, to cross in secrecy and without permission. Although his closest Bedouin companions knew who he was, he hoped to pass himself off as an Arab from the north.

The journey was an intense emotional experience. "The Empty Quarter," he explained in *Arabian Sands*, "offered me the chance to win distinction as a traveller; but I believed it could give me more than this, that in those empty wastes I could find the peace that comes with solitude and, among the Bedu, comradeship in a hostile world. Many who venture into dangerous places have found this comradeship among people from other lands, the very differences which separate them binding them ever more closely. I found it among the Bedu. Without it these journeys would have been a meaningless penance."

The round trip which Thesiger proposed for his first crossing of the Empty Quarter was from Salala on the Indian Ocean to the Liwa Oasis, just inland from the Persian Gulf – a distance of 2,000 miles. He hoped to complete it in three months. On this odyssey he kept his clothes and supplies to a bare minimum. He wore only a coloured loin-cloth and a long shirt, although he did permit himself a sleeping-bag for protection against bitter desert nights. He normally went barefoot.

The priority at all times was to get to the next well with its brackish water, water that even the camels were often reluctant to drink. The endless march over the dunes in the burning sun seemed to sap Thesiger's lifeblood. "The sun was scorching hot and I felt empty, sick and dizzy," he wrote. "As I struggled up the slope knee-deep in shifting sand, my heart thumped wildly and my thirst grew worse. I found it difficult to swallow; even my ears felt blocked and yet I knew it would be many intolerable hours before I could drink."

The longest single haul through the heart of the Empty Quarter took 14 days. Thesiger and his four companions and their camels reached the point of exhaustion. They approached each new dune in despair of ever reaching the top. Their water-supply was reduced to foul-tasting dregs in the goatskin bags; the daily ration of hard, dry bread stuck in their mouths. Apart from a few drops of coffee when they arose in the bitter cold before dawn, they marched all day with practically nothing to eat or drink, only moistening their lips occasionally. For the Bedouin this was their normal way of life. As for Thesiger, he was carried onward by sheer determination, perhaps even excitement. The prize was simply a drink of clean, nearly tasteless water. But, says Thesiger, "I was content with that."

On a fine April morning in 1887, the year of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, a 23-year-old British soldier rode out through the gates of Peking and on beyond the Great Wall of China. It was the beginning of one of the longest solitary journeys ever accomplished by a Victorian traveller. His name was Francis Younghusband and he had obtained special leave from his regiment in India to travel overland from Peking, across the Gobi Desert of Mongolia, on through Chinese Turkestan and thence into India, by the back door over the Himalayas.

Although Younghusband hoped to gather some military intelligence about Russian penetration down on the border of China, his expedition was essentially a personal adventure. He approached it with that rather naïve and boyish enthusiasm displayed by many Victorian travellers. "I should be able to see these secluded people of Central Asia, dim figures whom I had pictured in my mind from reading the accounts of the few travellers who had been amongst them," he wrote in *Heart of a Continent*, his account of the journey. "Then, too, there was the fascination of seeing the heart of the Himalayas . . . all combined was one grand project – this idea of striking boldly out from Peking to penetrate India – that of itself inspired enthusiasms and roused every spark of exploring ardour in me. No excitement I have ever experienced has come up to that of planning out a great journey."

It is no surprise to find Francis Younghusband undertaking such a venture. He had been born within sight of the Himalayas at the hill station of Murree, in Kashmir, where his father was an Army officer. For a few years he led an outdoor life in the foothills of the mountains and then, like so many children of families serving the Empire abroad, he was packed off to school in England. During the holidays he was entrusted to a pair of exceptionally strict aunts, who beat him regularly with a leather strap.

Just as Wilfred Thesiger longed to get back to the Ethiopia where he had been

Francis Younghusband, at 23, went from Peking across the Gobi Desert, through Chinese Turkestan, into India by way of the Himalayas – an incredible 3,000 miles

brought up, so Younghusband yearned for the Himalayas. And when he finally returned as a young soldier and could take a short leave walking in the mountains, he felt he had come home. The trek from Peking followed naturally.

His odyssey was a plunge into the unknown. No one in Peking had any useful information, neither about routes across the wastes of the Gobi Desert, nor about the kind of reception a lone European traveller might expect. But Younghusband set out unperturbed, accompanied only by two Chinese interpreters, one of whom soon turned back rather than face the privations of the desert. He took along, however, substantial provisions for his journey, explaining that although some people thought the whole essential of a journey was to be as uncomfortable as possible, he did not agree. "I determined to treat myself as well as circumstances would permit." So he laid in sacks of flour and tins of beef, preserved milk, butter and even mushrooms. A couple of bottles of sherry were added for good measure (which came in very handy one night in the Gobi when they camped far from a well).

Near the fringe of the Gobi Desert, Younghusband hired five camels and their drivers for the modest sum of £45 for 60 days. Then Lui-san, his remaining interpreter, consulted a Chinese almanac for an auspicious day to start. April 24 and 25 were not good days, he announced, but April 26 would be fine. On that day, therefore, they left the fertile plains of China behind. Once out into the desert "not a sound would be heard and scarcely a living thing seen."

He kept a wary eye open for robbers who were supposed to infest the desert, but never saw any. He hid his money, mostly silver coin, in odd corners of his baggage, even in sacks of flour and empty beef tins. Normally they travelled from three in the afternoon until midnight, to avoid the heat of the day, usually managing to cover nearly 20 miles a day. Their route swung north from Kwei-hwa-cheng into Mongolia and then west along the fringe of the Altai Mountains towards the trading town of Hami, on the far side of the Gobi.

Surprisingly fresh, they arrived in Hami just 70 days out from Kwei-hwa-cheng, having covered 1,255 miles over the desert. Here Lui-san set about hiring a cart, mules and ponies for the next great stage of over 1,000 miles to Kashgar, on the fringe of the Himalayas. The route now, although strange to a European, had been well travelled by caravans for centuries. There were even what passed for inns, but Younghusband usually preferred to sleep on top of his cart on a mattress, while Lui-san slept on the ground underneath.

The real test, however, was beyond Kashgar. What had been a relatively easy journey for 2,000 miles turned into a nightmare as they moved into the heart of the Himalayas. "Before me rose tier after tier of stately mountains – peaks of untainted snow," he wrote. "It was a scene which, as I viewed it and realized that this seemingly impregnable array must be pierced and overcome, seemed to put the iron into my soul and stiffen all my energies for the task before me."

His plan was to make the first-ever crossing of the forbidding Mustagh Pass in the Karakoram range, not far from K2 – the second-highest mountain in the world. He recruited local guides who said they could take him through if he trusted their judgement rather than such meagre maps as existed. Yet they had a quite stunning lack of mountaineering equipment – no proper boots, no ice-axes. They possessed only an ordinary pickaxe to cut steps in snow and ice. "All I had for footgear were some native boots of soft leather without nails and without heels, mere leather stockings, in fact," Younghusband wrote in a letter to his father. "which gave no sort of grip on the icy surface."

Toiling up to the pass they found it to be a tumble of broken ice, with a sheer icewall to descend on the far side. Faced with this precipice, Younghusband was so dumbfounded that he could say nothing for awhile. "The guides meanwhile were looking at me and, imagining that an Englishman never went back from an enterprise he had once started, took it as a matter of course that, as I gave no order to go back, I meant to go on," he recalled later. He proceeded to tie handkerchiefs round the insteps of his boots in an attempt to get a better grip on the ice and they started off. Somehow, slipping and sliding, they worked their way down as one guide went ahead with the pickaxe to chop out steps. They were, at least, roped together, but without proper equipment, probably could not have held on if anyone had slipped. "Outwardly I kept as cheerful as I could," wrote Younghusband, "but inwardly I shuddered at each fresh step I took." Once a huge rock came loose and narrowly missed sweeping two of the men to their deaths. But finally they made it.

"Those moments when I stood at the foot of the pass are long remembered by me – moments of intense relief, and of deep gratitude for the success that had been granted," Younghusband wrote. "Such feelings as mine were now cannot be described in words, but they are known to everyone who has set his heart on one great object and has accomplished it. I took one last look at the pass, never before seen by a European and then we started away down the glacier to find some bare spot on which to lay our rugs and rest."

The only casualty of the descent was his last bottle of brandy, which was accidently smashed. His boots, however, were completely worn through. "I had to hobble along on my toes or heels to keep the worn-out part, by the balls of my feet, from the sharp stones and rocky debris of the glacier." When he finally stumbled down into Srinagar in Kashmir

a few days later, seven months out from Peking, no one took him for an Englishman. "Dressed in a Yarkand sheepskin coat and long Yarkand boots, and with a round Tam O' Shanter cap as the only European article of dress about me, and with a rough beard, and my face burnt by exposure in the desert and cut and reddened by the cold on the glaciers, I was addressed by the people of the place as a Yarkandi," – an understandable error, for whatever they knew of the eccentricities of the British in India, they had never before seen an Englishman walk in from Peking, 3,000 miles away.

Any explorer must possess infinite stamina and determination to press onwards towards his chosen goal. Francis Younghusband in the passes of the Himalayas or Wilfred Thesiger in the sands of Arabia were driven forward by some inward urge that kept them going whatever the hardship. But that passion to unveil the unknown can become a total obsession and drive a man to his death. That is what happened to Colonel Percy Fawcett, whose story is one of the saddest and most mysterious of this century.

Fawcett disappeared into the jungles of Brazil in 1925 in search of a lost city. He did not return. Speculation about his fate has been endless. Was he massacred by Indians? Or held prisoner by them? Or even deified by them? Did he find his lost city? Expeditions set out in search of him, but the jungles have never yielded up the answer.

Percy Fawcett was born in Torquay in 1867 and brought up in the strict régime of a Victorian family. His childhood years were, he recalled later, devoid of parental affection, so that he grew up shy and introverted. He lived in a world of his own imagination, shunning companions and preferring to do things on his own. He joined the Army and was soon sent out to Ceylon; he had little time for the routine chores of military life there. Instead, he devoted all his time to a study of Buddhism and a fruitless search for lost treasures, a search which foreshadowed his later determination to seek out the lost cities of South America.

What he constantly longed for was some opportunity to go off on his own to test himself in the wilds. The opportunity finally came in 1906 when the Royal

Colonel Percy Fawcett, a puritanical individualist, disappeared in 1925 in the Brazilian jungles of the Xingu, a tributary of the Amazon, where he had gone in search of a fabled lost city.

Geographical Society offered him a contract with the Bolivian government to survey their borders with Brazil. "What it really amounts to is exploration," said the President of the Society, outlining the job. "It may be difficult and even dangerous. Not much is known about that part of Bolivia, except that the savages there have a pretty bad reputation. One hears the most appalling tales."

Nothing could have been more tempting to Fawcett. "The romantic history of the Spanish and the Portuguese conquests and the mystery of the vast, unexplored wilds made the lure of South America irresistible to me," he wrote. "There were my wife and son to consider, and another child on the way; but Destiny intended me to go." For the next 19 years Fawcett roamed throughout South America. He proved to have formidable powers of endurance, so that companions on his expeditions were left floundering far behind. He appeared quite impervious to insect bites and fevers that tormented other explorers.

While his early years were taken up with border surveying, he gradually became absorbed in Indian tales of the lost cities of the jungles. One day in Rio he came across an obscure log of a Portuguese expedition that had wandered through the Matto Grosso region of central Brazil from 1743 to 1753. The expedition claimed to have discovered a great ruined city somewhere between the Xingu and Araguaya tributaries of the River Amazon. They found gold coins and the remains of silver-mines. Fawcett was fascinated by their descriptions of enormous columns covered with inscriptions and buildings roofed with great stone slabs. He was convinced, he wrote, "that amazing ruins of ancient cities – ruins incomparably older than those in Egypt – exist in the Matto Grosso."

He was certain, too, that he could find them. Nothing would turn him back. On a preliminary expedition in 1920, he set out northwards into the jungles from Cuyaba, the capital of the state of Matto Grosso. But floods and sickness among his companions soon forced the expedition to turn back. Fawcett wrote bitterly on his return: "I have been prevented from reaching my objective by lack of stamina in my companions."

Although he was now in his mid-fifties he had no thoughts of giving up. Indeed, over the next five years, as he sought to organize another expedition, his determination turned to desperation. His new plan was to organize a small expedition consisting simply of himself, his eldest son, Jack, then 22, and a friend, Raleigh Rimell, also in his twenties.

He was convinced that Jack and Rimell could match up to him, where others had failed. "Jack is young enough to adapt himself to anything," he wrote, "and a few months on the trail will toughen him sufficiently. Jack and Raleigh will have to learn to swim, as it were, by being plunged into deep water. With no former experience they will be taken into a supreme enduring test . . . it will be no pampered exploration party, with bearers, guides or cargo animals. Such top-heavy expeditions get nowhere: they linger on the fringe of civilization."

Fawcett certainly proposed to go far beyond the last fringe of civilization in search of his city. He expected to be away for at least two years and told his wife and friends not to worry if they heard nothing for three. In any event, no rescue expedition was to be organized. "If, with all my experience, we can't make it, there's not much hope for others," he said. "That's one reason why I'm not telling exactly where we're going."

But did he really know where he was going? And did he really expect to come back? Studying his own account of the preparations one gets the curious feeling that he knew he would never return. He was certainly not willing to listen to those who told him he was wasting his time. When a French traveller, with many years' experience in the Matto Grosso, assured him that no such city existed in the region he was to explore, Fawcett dismissed him. "The Frenchman had an alcoholic breath and I cannot consider drinkers fully reliable." (Fawcett himself did not drink or smoke.)

But probably he did not want to listen to advice. He concluded sadly just before setting out, that "if the journey is not successful my work in South America ends in failure, for I can never do any more. I must inevitably be discredited as a visionary, and branded as one who had only personal enrichment in view. Who will ever understand that I want no glory from it – no money for myself – that I am doing it unpaid in the hope that its ultimate benefit to mankind will justify the years spent in the quest?" And he added bitterly "the last few years have been the most wretched and disillusioned of my life – full of anxieties, uncertainties, financial stringency, underhand dealing and outright treachery. My wife and children have been sacrificed for it."

So it was really the beginning of the last act of a tragedy when Colonel Fawcett, now 58, set off from Cuyaba in the early summer of 1925, accompanied by Jack Fawcett, Raleigh Rimell and two guides. They proceeded north towards the River Kuluene, a branch of the Xingu, and from the start they made heavy going. The first letters sent back by the expedition reported that they were already "fagged out." Rimell was soon suffering from an infected foot. After four weeks on the trail, plagued by insects and mosquitoes, they paused to rest at "Dead Horse Camp," which was the farthest Fawcett had penetrated on his previous expedition in 1920.

Here the Indian guides, too terrified to proceed into what they regarded as hostile Indian territory ahead, turned back, carrying messages with them. In a letter to his wife Fawcett painted a dismal picture. "I myself am bitten or stung by ticks all over my body. Raleigh I am anxious about. He still has one leg in a bandage but won't go back. . . . I cannot hope to stand up to this journey better than Jack or Raleigh, but I had to do it." And he ends, "You need have no fear of failure." After that, silence.

Over the years the rumours have been myriad, the hard facts few. The first relief expedition in 1928 apparently followed Fawcett's route to a small village of the Anaugna Indians on the River Kuluene. The Indians explained in sign language that three white men had come through. The two young ones were lame and exhausted, but the older man had taken them on after a brief rest. The Indians had seen the smoke from their camp-fires for another five days – thereafter, nothing. The Indians said they had been massacred. The mystery still remains ✈

ASSAULT ON EVEREST

In 1924, George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Irvine, apparently about to conquer Everest for the first time, vanished in shrouds of mist some 700 feet short of the five-mile-high peak. The ill-fated assault was recorded by a member of the expedition, Captain John Noel, now in his 80s, who later printed his black and white views in glass and hand-coloured them to produce the glowing series of pictures shown on these pages. Captain Noel (above) trained his telescope camera, which he designed to withstand extreme cold, on the summit to record the victory of the two tiny human specks he could see against the sky. He recorded tragedy instead. The bodies of Mallory and Irvine lie somewhere high in Everest's wilderness of rock and ice, known to the Tibetans as Chomolungma – "Goddess Mother of the World." They may actually have reached the pinnacle and fallen to their deaths on the way down. In any case, they came closer to triumph than climbers ever did until the victorious expedition led by John Hunt in 1953.

Team members pose at their base camp, sited at 16,000 feet. (Back, left to right) Irvine, Mallory, Lieutenant-Colonel E.F. Norton (Leader), N.E. Odell, J. MacDonald (interpreter); (front) E.O. Shebbeare, Captain J.G.Bruce, Dr. T.H.Somervell, Bentley Beetham.

On the Road to Everest

Approaching Everest through Tibet from the north – a way long since closed to outsiders – the expedition stopped at Shekar Dzong, set on precipitous mountain crags. Lookout-towers perched on the 17,500-foot peak, loftier than any in Europe, yet less than two-thirds as high as Everest itself. Half-way up stood the Military Governor's castle and on the lower slopes a monastery.

The expedition members were the first Europeans ever to see these architectural miracles. The great walls of stone and mud blended so harmoniously with the rock conformations that they seemed to be a part of the barren mountain itself.

The Shining Crystal Monastery

At Shekar Dzong, the expedition were entertained by the Governor and his wife and received at the monastery by the Chief Lama.

The Governor put on a show of games and dances and gave them a 12-course banquet in a Chinese tent where he honoured them as guests with smoked mutton prepared 40 years before; and invited them to a ceremonial tea-party at which they sipped lukewarm tea mixed with salt and rancid yak's butter.

At the monastery the Lama showed them through his gold-roofed temple, a rare privilege for foreigners. Then they spent two hours with the Lama, who was considered an incarnation of deity and had to be treated with due reverence. This involved bowing low to the ground before him and sitting in absolute silence, with their hats in their hands, while he addressed and blessed them – a vital ritual, for without his blessing, the Sherpas who accompanied the expedition as guides and porters would not believe it safe to continue.

The Governor and his wife preside at tea, served out of cups hewn from solid onyx blocks.

The monastery's inner courtyard hinted at the splendours the climbers were to find in the Temple, whose gold tower is seen above centre.

Attendant lamas stand behind their chief as he blesses the Sherpas. One lama (right) holds a Lhasa terrier, the Tibetans' favourite dog.

On the Temple's altar stand peacock feathers brought by the expedition as gifts to the Tibetans, who prized them highly as symbols of beauty and majesty.

Mapping the Unknown

Everest's challengers were concerned with more than scaling the formidable peak. Part of their self-imposed mission was to map the vast unknown world of ice, rock and glacier. The pictorial map (left), devised by the photographer, Captain John Noel, shows the East Rongbuk Glacier, found to be the best approach to the final ascent, plus the chain of support camps (each 2,000 feet higher than the previous one) used by the expedition's climbers as they prepared for the final assault on the summit.

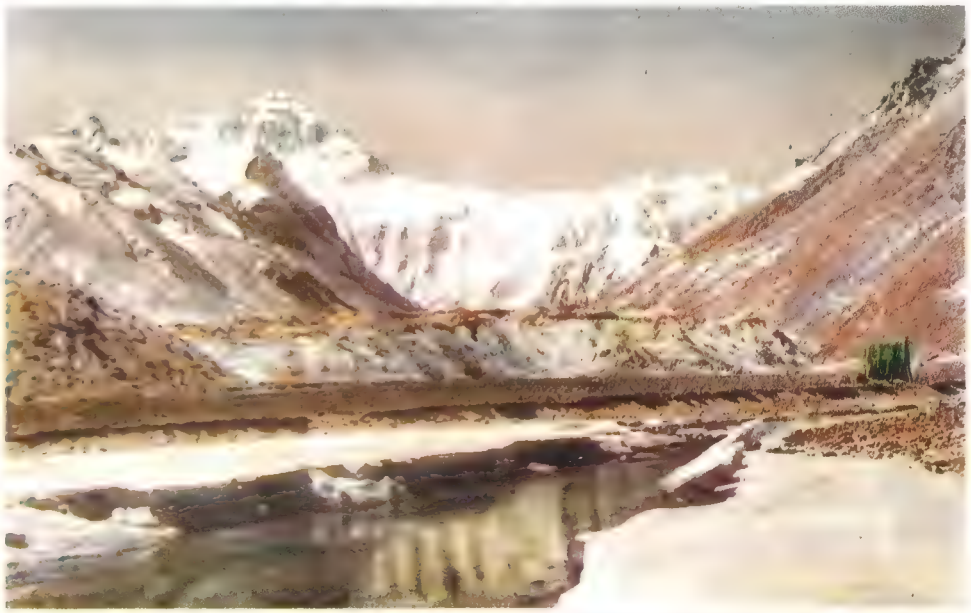
Noel had made other maps as the result of a journey to Tibet in disguise, in 1913, when hostile soldiers still guarded the mountain passes against foreigners. The region was first charted on a large scale by Major T. H. Morshead (right) who surveyed 50,000 square miles in 1922.

Major Morshead, maps a Himalayan landscape at 15,500 feet. He climbed 25,000 feet up Everest to conduct surveys like this. In doing so he was so frostbitten that he had to be carried down by lantern-light during a roaring gale and later lost the top joints of several fingers.

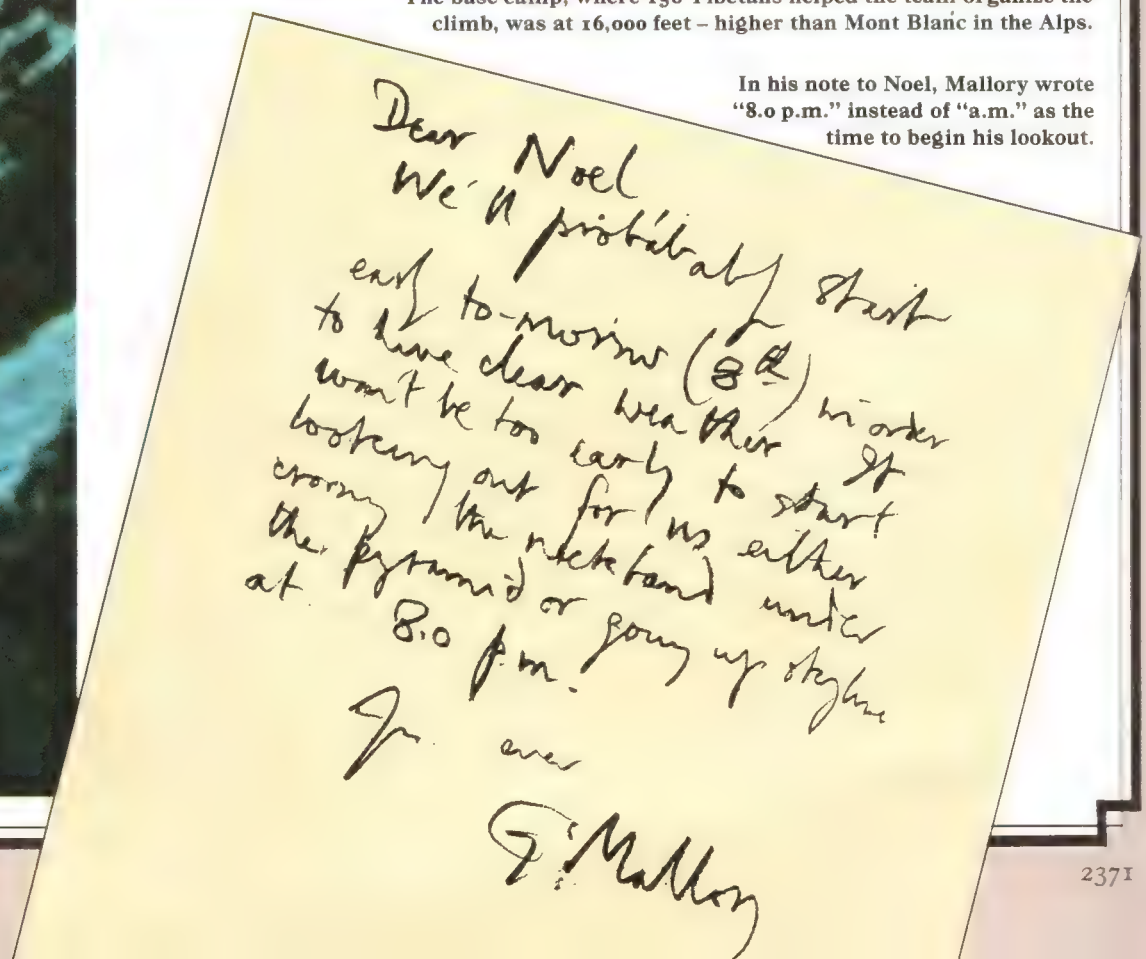
The team fight a biting north-east wind to set up the camp at 27,000 feet, from which Mallory and Irvine made their last fatal climb.

Into the Mountain Mists

As the team tackled the lower slopes, in late May, Mallory, already suffering from extreme fatigue, wrote to his wife: "The physique of the whole party has gone down sadly. . . . Darling, I wish you the best I can – that your anxiety will be at an end before you get this, with the best news. . . . It is fifty to one against us, but we'll have a whack yet and do ourselves proud." The leader, Norton, commented, "There is no doubt Mallory knows his is a forlorn hope." A week later the team, in a spurt towards Everest's peak, racing to beat the monsoons, struggled against a fierce wind up the north-east shoulder and on June 7, Mallory sent a note from the last bivouac at 27,000 feet, alerting the photographer to watch the skyline the next day. Then he, Irvine and three Sherpas set out under a clear blue sky on the final assault, with far-from-perfect oxygen equipment. Odell stayed close behind to keep an eye on their progress. He was the last to see them as they disappeared, never to be seen again, into a sudden mist, at a point higher than men had ever climbed before.



The base camp, where 150 Tibetans helped the team organize the climb, was at 16,000 feet – higher than Mont Blanc in the Alps.


Dear Noel
We'll probably start early to-morrow (8th) in order to have clear weather. It won't be too early to start looking out for us either crossing the rock-band under the Pyramid or going up the skyline at 8.0 p.m.!
Yours ever
G. Mallory

In his note to Noel, Mallory wrote "8.0 p.m." instead of "a.m." as the time to begin his lookout.

Last Signal from the Sky

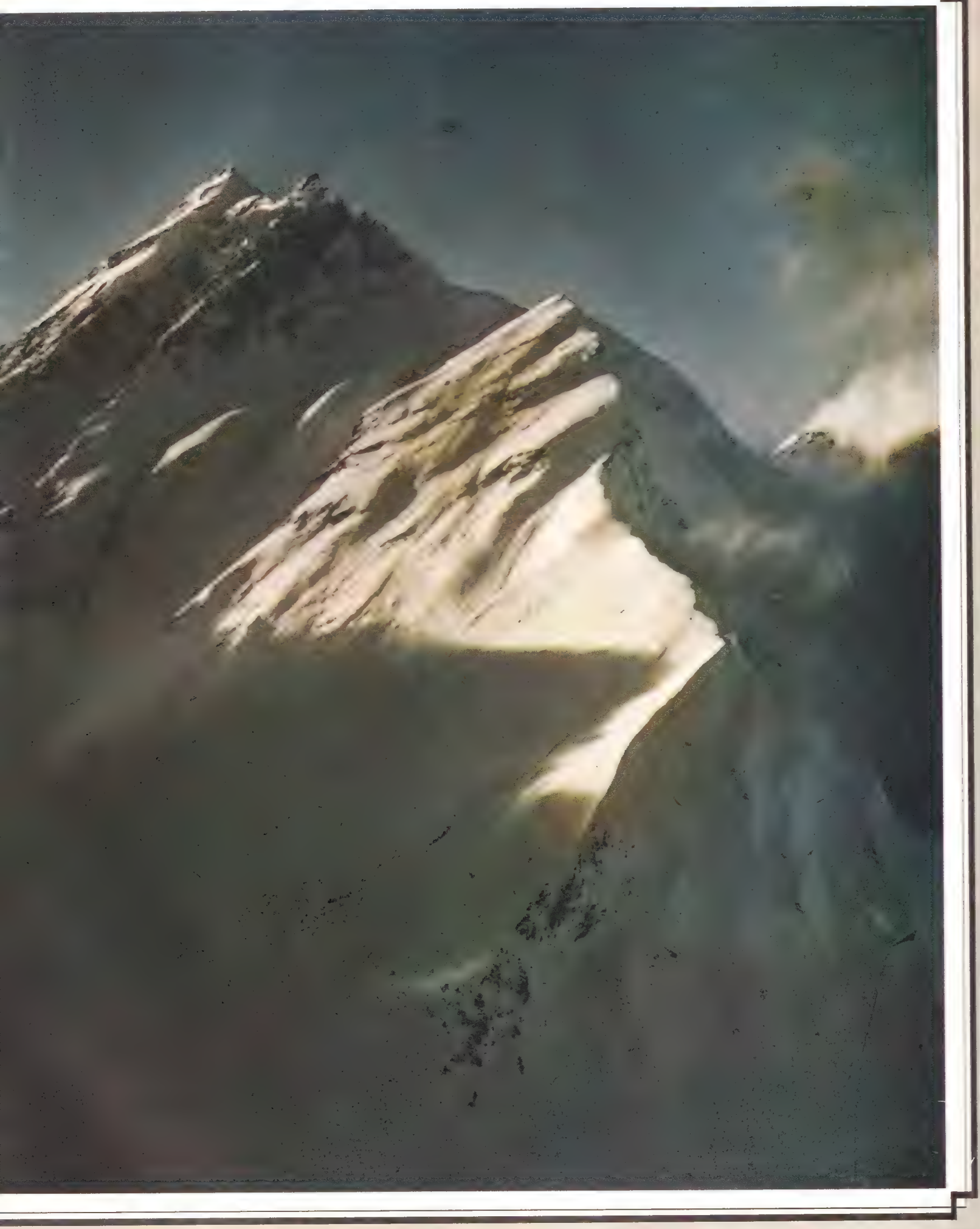
At daybreak on June 8, Captain Noel, perched on an eyrie at 22,000 feet, trained his camera on the summit as Mallory had instructed him to do. Two keen-eyed assistants took turns with him to man the telescope; but the peak was lost in cloud and rolling mist. They watched for two whole days and nights, with hope fading at every hour.

Suddenly a group came into view. It was Odell with his support party, creeping out to the edge of an ice-shelf to make a signal. Noel stood riveted as the men in the sky laid six blankets in the shape of a cross. There was no mistaking its tragic message, caught by the photographer's magnifying lens.

Odell, who had last seen the climbers about 700 feet short of the summit, had twice gone up to their 27,000-foot bivouac in search of them. But all he found were empty tents. When he descended at last, he said, "I think that it is quite possible and even likely that Mallory and Irvine reached the top and were overtaken by the night in their descent, exhausted and frozen to death."

In 1933, the first Everest expedition after the tragedy discovered a rusted ice-axe just below the summit ridge. Its Swiss maker's mark identified it as the property of either Mallory or Irvine. Its position has led many mountaineers to agree with Odell. Perhaps after all Mallory and Irvine died victorious.

Odell and two Sherpas make the grim sign high up on the mountainside which tells the rest of the expedition that Mallory and Irvine must be assumed dead near the summit, captured by Noel in clearer weather (right).



II. The Greatest Conquests

I must go down to the sea, again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by.

Sir Francis Chichester always said that these lines from John Masefield's poem, "Sea Fever," were the "key to my life-time search for romance and adventure." They certainly capture the spirit of the 20th Century's most popular adventurer. Chichester has become a name to conjure with like the great travellers of past centuries. As one writer put it: "Chichester is in the line of great individualists who have enriched human history. . . . Martin Frobisher, Richard Burton, Charles Doughty, Waterton, Shackleton and their peers."

Today, Chichester's name springs to mind as the man who won the first solo transatlantic yacht race in 1960 and then, in 1966–67, went on to make his epic 226-day single-handed voyage round the world. Not content with that, he was back for more in 1972 in the transatlantic race once again. But his sailing achievements are really the second chapter of his adventurous life. Forty years before he had been a pioneer – and a popular hero – in the air. Chichester was one of that small band of men and women who found new horizons to be conquered with the coming of the aeroplane. As a young man in his late twenties, Chichester shared their courage and determination to fly fragile aircraft over deserts and oceans, through sandstorms or typhoons, staking out the air-routes of the world. He notched up an impressive record: second man to fly solo from England to Australia, first man to fly solo east–west across the Tasman Sea from New Zealand to Australia, and first man to fly solo from Australia to Japan.

He did it all for his own amusement, as a personal battle against the elements. When vast crowds acclaimed his arrival in Australia after his flight from England in 1930 he was appalled. "The fame I ran into hit me like a shock," he recalled later. "I was trying only to achieve a private target I had set myself." He used almost exactly the same words 40 years later as he set out on the 1972 Atlantic Race. Whether challenging the air or the sea, he did so for his own personal satisfaction.

Like so many of his fellow adventurers, Chichester had a lonely childhood. Although his father sent him to Marlborough College and had plans for him to enter the Indian Civil Service, Chichester felt otherwise. "Real life is flowing past," he explained, "and leaving me behind." With a mere £10 in his pocket, he emigrated to New Zealand. There he tried his hand as sheep-herder, horse-wrangler, lumberjack, coal-miner, gold-prospector and door-to-door book salesman until, with a friend, he opened a highly profitable land-selling agency. At the age of 26 he was earning £10,000 a year.

Soon he acquired a couple of aeroplanes for giving people joy-rides but, since the pilots he employed were constantly crash-landing, he decided to learn to fly himself. His first lessons were disastrous; he could not get the hang of it at all. Then, on a visit to England in 1929, he took some first-class lessons and quickly qualified for his pilot's licence. With that in hand he proudly bought himself a tiny single-engined Gipsy Moth (the name he also always used for his boats) and promptly set about planning to fly it back solo to Australia. When he casually mentioned what he proposed to more experienced pilots, they looked at him open-mouthed; only one man – Bert Hinkler – had ever flown solo to Australia before. Chichester, with less than six months' flying experience, had no doubt that he could beat Hinkler's record of 15½ days.

On a cold winter's night in December, 1929, he took off from Croydon Airport. His route took him down past Lyons, over the Alps to Pisa, and then across the Mediterranean to North Africa. There he almost met with disaster. Coming in to land at Tripoli after dark, he misjudged the airfield and landed on a salt-pan covered with four inches of water. The plane tipped on its nose, breaking the propeller. The attempt on Hinkler's record was ruined, but not Chichester's determination to continue. Ten days later he was in the air again, heading east.

Since there were no established air-routes in those days, he had to land where he could. One night he put down on a racecourse in Rangoon, Burma, after circling for ten minutes to let some horses finish their evening gallop.

His most hazardous moment came over the Australian outback. He missed sighting a small township where he was supposed to put down for fuel. Almost out of petrol, he came down in the desert close to a muddy waterhole. After a restless night he carefully measured out how much petrol he had left. Just three gallons. That meant he could take off and fly for 15 minutes looking for signs of civilization. If he found none, he could just make it back to the waterhole, where he would wait until someone came by. Precisely at the 15th minute, he spied through the heat haze a cluster of corrugated-iron rooftops – the township he had missed the night before.

When he arrived safely in Sydney on January 31, 1930, he was accorded a hero's welcome. He was the second man to fly solo from England to Australia and he had covered the 12,650 miles in 180½ hours flying time. But he was not content with the achievement. "Gradually," he recalled later, "I made up my mind there were two things I wanted to do; I wanted to complete a circumnavigation of the world in Gipsy Moth and I wanted to fly across from New Zealand to Australia. No one had flown across the Tasman Sea alone, and I had a great urge to be the first to do it."

At that time long, over-ocean flights were rare, but Chichester was undaunted. He turned his battered little Gipsy Moth into a seaplane so that he could land on rivers or lagoons.

On his crossing of the Tasman Sea, Chichester proposed to make refuelling stops at Norfolk Island and Lord Howe Island. All went well until he got to Lord Howe Island. A storm blew up overnight and in the morning Chichester discovered that his plane had sunk. Only the tail was poking out of the water. At first, it seemed that Gipsy Moth was a write-off. But Chichester felt otherwise.

Aided by the islanders, Chichester pitched in and virtually put a new plane together. Two women carefully stitched the fabric on the wings and the island's best mechanic fixed the engine. After nine weeks all was ready. Chichester broke a bottle of brandy on the propeller boss and started the engine.

Somehow the little seaplane went teetering into the sky and onwards to Australia to complete the first solo east–

west crossing of the Tasman Sea. That was just the beginning. Chichester was off again in less than three weeks, heading Gipsy Moth north for Japan on the first stage of a solo flight back to England by way of Canada, to complete his circumnavigation of the globe. "This is the supreme ecstasy of life," he wrote in his log as he set out. But not for long.

Having safely completed the first solo flight from Australia to Japan, he was cheerfully taking off one morning from the harbour of Katsuura on the south-east coast of Japan. As he climbed "there was a dreadful shock and I felt a terrific impact." He had flown straight into seven telephone cables across the harbour. Instead of snapping, the wires acted like a giant catapult and flung Gipsy Moth down to the ground. By some miracle Chichester was pulled out alive, although badly hurt. As for Gipsy Moth, that gallant little plane that had carried him more than half round the world was a complete write-off. Chichester gave her to a local school and took a slow boat to England to recuperate.

His taste for adventuring, however, was not crushed. Although his plans to circumnavigate the world alone had to be abandoned for the time being, the thought of how fine it might be never left him. "As the years passed," he wrote, "this urge to circle the world alone lay dormant in me, like a gorse seed which will lie in the earth for fifty years until the soil is stirred to admit some air, or light, and the seed suddenly burgeons." Thirty years later the seed blossomed. Chichester circled the world in *Gipsy Moth IV*. He went by sea now, he explained, because "flying gradually lost the attractions of pioneering . . . and all the places that I had hoped to go, where an aeroplane had never been . . . had grown used to them."

Of all the challenges accepted by imperial adventurers, the climbing of Mount Everest must rank as the greatest.

Mount Everest was an irresistible lure for mountaineers, right from the moment in 1852 when, as a story has it, a clerk of the Indian Trigonometrical Survey in New Delhi dashed into his superior's office exclaiming "Sir, I have discovered the highest mountain in the world."

Since no one was then aware that the 29,002-foot-high mountain had long been called Chomolungma – "Goddess Mother of the World" – by the Tibetans on whose borders it stood, it was promptly christened Everest, after Sir George Everest, the first Surveyor-General of India.

Not until after the First World War did Sir Charles Bell, the Political Agent of the Viceroy in Sikkim, gain the consent of the Dalai Lama for an expedition to approach Everest from the Tibetan north side. In 1919, the Alpine Club and the Royal Geographical Society together formed an Everest Committee to encourage and help finance expeditions. Then, in May, 1921, the first English reconnaissance expedition set out.

The expedition approached the mountain from the north through Tibet, working its way up to the great Rongbuk Monastery, an isolated community of Buddhist monks just 20 miles from Everest. Then it circled round the north face trying to spy out the most practical route. It was faced with a formidable task. Everest is rather like a pyramid, with three great faces and three main ridges sweeping down from its summit. The only route that seemed feasible to George Leigh Mallory, the leader of the expedition in 1921 was up the Rongbuk Glacier and on to a shoulder he named the North Col. From there the way led along the knife-edge of a ridge to the summit itself. But how would men cope with such heights? The 1921 party could only speculate on the hazards beyond.

The next May an army of 13 Englishmen and 160 Nepalese and Tibetan porters came creeping back up the valleys of the Himalayas to find the answer. The 1922 expedition was led by Brigadier-General Charles Bruce and included such crack climbers as Mallory, Major E.F. Norton, Howard Somervell and George Finch. Finch came along as a great advocate of and expert in the use of oxygen, an asset that many mountaineers

In 1930, Chichester, after barely six months in the cockpit, flew solo from England to Australia in this one-engined Gipsy Moth.

Sir Francis Chichester won the first single-handed transatlantic yacht race in 1960, made a record crossing in 1962 and sailed round the world solo in 1966–67.

were then loath to adopt. They felt you climbed mountains without artificial aids or not at all. This expedition was to make two assaults on the summit, one with oxygen, one without.

But for all the preparations, no one understood at that stage just how much of a test Everest could be. No one realized, for instance, how quickly frostbite could take hold. Unlike later expeditions, which came equipped with windproof suits stuffed with down, several of the climbers wore simply old hats, motoring gloves, an extra pair of socks, a couple of sweaters and a scarf round their necks. Consequently, they were often frostbitten before the difficult part began.

Although they worked their way up the mountain in stages, establishing camps as they went, they tried to rush the whole job too quickly. The final camp for the assault was at only 25,000 feet, leaving an enormous distance to be covered to the summit and back in a single push. They made three abortive attempts before they gave up.

Two years later, in 1924, an even bigger invasion force, numbering 300 climbers and porters, moved back to the mountain. Among the climbers was Mallory, now making his third attempt. For him it had become a personal crusade. Indeed, he regarded it by now as *his* mountain and *he* was going to be first on top. He wrote to his wife as the expedition neared Everest, "The conquest of the mountain is the great thing and the whole plan is mine and my part will be a sufficiently interesting one and will give me, perhaps, the best chance of all of getting to the top. It is almost unthinkable with this plan that I shan't get to the top; I can't see myself coming down defeated."

From the start, however, the expedition had poor luck. Two porters died in a blizzard as they ferried supplies up to support the first assault. Further storms halted all progress for days on end. Finally, at the end of May, with the monsoon due very shortly, Norton, the expedition leader, decided an attempt must be made. Porters got Camp VI established at 26,800 feet (an extraordinary feat by men carrying 50-pound loads and not aided by oxygen). Norton now determined to send his climbers in relays, so that a fresh two-man team was poised ready to go every morning.

Norton himself, accompanied by Somervell, made the first attempt. They got to 27,500 feet without too much difficulty, but then exhaustion began to creep over them. Norton pushed on alone until, at 28,126 feet, he had to return.

But the fact that Norton had reached over 28,000 feet without oxygen was a great encouragement to Mallory and Andrew Irvine, who were the next to go with oxygen. They spent the night of June 7 at Camp VI and set out for the summit early next morning. Shortly after noon that day, N.E. Odell, coming up to Camp VI with food supplies, looked up toward the summit which had been shrouded in mist all day. Suddenly it cleared for a moment and he saw two tiny figures working their way along the ridge about 700 feet short of the top. Then the mists closed in again. George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Irvine have never been seen since.

Whether they reached the top will never be known. When Odell saw them in early afternoon it was already very late in the day for them to make the remaining feet up. The next day he climbed to Camp VI and found their tents empty. Nine years later, the 1933 Everest expedition came upon an ice-axe belonging to one of the two men at just over 28,000 feet. This find suggested they met with an accident on the way down.

The deaths of Mallory and Irvine ended the first era of Everest expeditions. The Dalai Lama refused permission for any more. Sir Charles Bell who had persuaded the Dalai to allow the expeditions in the first place, was now dead. No one else had access to the Dalai's thoughts. In August, 1932, he relented and agreed to another expedition so long as all the members of it were British. By then a new generation of climbers had matured. Among them was Eric Shipton, who was to play as vital a role in the next five attempts as Mallory had in the first three. Shipton had been born in Ceylon, where his father was a tea-planter. His father died when he was three and thereafter the family led a somewhat nomadic life between Ceylon, southern India, France and England. They never had a settled home.

Shipton, like so many adventurers, was a solitary child. "I preferred doing things on my own," he wrote in his autobiography, *That Untravelled World*. He felt shy and out of place at an English school. The consolation came when he was old enough to make his own way in the world. Like Wilfred Thesiger, he embarked on a life of adventure. His first glimpse of the Himalayas in the early 1930s enchanted him. "A thrilling view of countless peaks of the Central Himalayas," he wrote, "several score more than 20,000 feet high, few of them named and all – *all* unclimbed."

Everest resisted several invasions in the 1930s, including one mounted in 1934 by an eccentric Englishman, Maurice Wilson, on his own. Wilson's initial plan had been to crash-land a small plane near the summit, get out, walk to the top and then climb down to the Rongbuk Glacier. When the Indians impounded his plane, he disguised himself as a Tibetan and walked into the Rongbuk Monastery. There he persuaded three men of the Sherpa tribe, tough hillmen, born and raised in villages 10,000 feet and more above sea-level, to help him and set off for North Col. He had no previous mountaineering experience and ignored the pleas made by his Sherpas to call off the enterprise. Eventually, the Sherpas deserted him. Wilson carried on alone but died of exhaustion and exposure in a little tent near the foot of the mountain.

Properly mounted expeditions returned in 1935, 1936 and 1938, but Everest defeated them all.

When it came to picking up the challenge again after the war, an entirely new situation prevailed. The way through Tibet was closed in 1950 when the Chinese Communists seized control. On the other hand, the Nepalese government, for the first time, was willing to let expeditions approach the mountain from the south.

The jumping-off point for future assaults, therefore, changed from Darjeeling to Katmandu. But the new route to the mountain called for a reconnaissance expedition. The ideal man to lead it was Eric Shipton, the veteran of four attempts in the 1930s. Shipton, a man who loved small expeditions rather than the miniature armies that often descended on Everest, proposed to take just three companions with him. At the last moment, however, Shipton on a hunch agreed to let two New Zealanders join the party: one of the New Zealanders was a lanky bee-keeper from Auckland, named Edmund Hillary. As Shipton said later: "My momentary caprice was to have far-reaching results."

Once they set out Shipton quickly recognized that Hillary was a formidable climber. For much of the expedition the two men worked together closely as a team. When they got their first glimpse of Everest, Shipton found that he didn't have to point out any of the key features to the tall New Zealander; although he had never been there, he knew them all by heart from photographs. Shipton was able to determine quite quickly that there was another potential route to the summit. It lay up a treacherous tangled icefall on to a high valley that Mallory had christened the Western Cwm 30 years before. From the Western Cwm it was a steady climb up to the shoulder of the South Col and thence up a snowy ridge to the summit.

So the route was there, but were the climbers ready? The Everest Committee decided to wait a year, giving the new post-war generation of British climbers an opportunity to get more Himalayan experience and to try out new oxygen and other specialized equipment. Moreover, the Swiss had been given permission by the Nepalese government to have a crack at Everest in 1952. So Eric Shipton took a training expedition to the Himalayas, while the Swiss made their first-ever attack. But they, like all the British expeditions before them, were beaten a mere 1,000 feet from the summit. Significantly, however, one man who almost made it was a tough little Sherpa, named Tenzing. He had been on the British expeditions in the 1930s as a porter; now he had emerged as an exceptional climber in his own right.

When the British came back for their assault in 1953, Sherpa Tenzing was the first man recruited. It was his sixth visit to the mountain. The natural man to have led the 1953 expedition was Eric Shipton, but he never saw entirely eye to eye with the Everest Committee over the size and make-up of the expedition. In the end it was an Army officer, John Hunt, who came in to lead the expedition. And among his top climbers was Edmund Hillary, who had performed so well on the 1951 expedition and on the training expedition the following year.

The expedition was on a grand scale. Some 350 porters set out from Katmandu early in March. Hunt had determined not only to get to the mountain in plenty of time, but also to allow his climbers many days to acclimatize properly. His plans also called for camps to be established high on the mountain, so that the assault parties would be poised relatively close to the summit for the final push. The initial challenge was the icefall, with enormous crevasses that had to be bridged with metal ladders. There was the constant danger that great boulders of ice might break loose and come tumbling down on the climbers.

But by mid-April Hillary and his companions had notched out a path up to it. They then spent a month staging out their camps up the mountain. By May 26 the first assault party of Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans was all set to go. Aided by oxygen, they reached the south summit of the mountain at 28,700 feet. But their oxygen supplies were too low to allow them to climb a further 300 feet along a snow-crusted ridge to the main summit. Two days later Hillary and Tenzing, with three other climbers, established Camp IX at 27,900 feet.

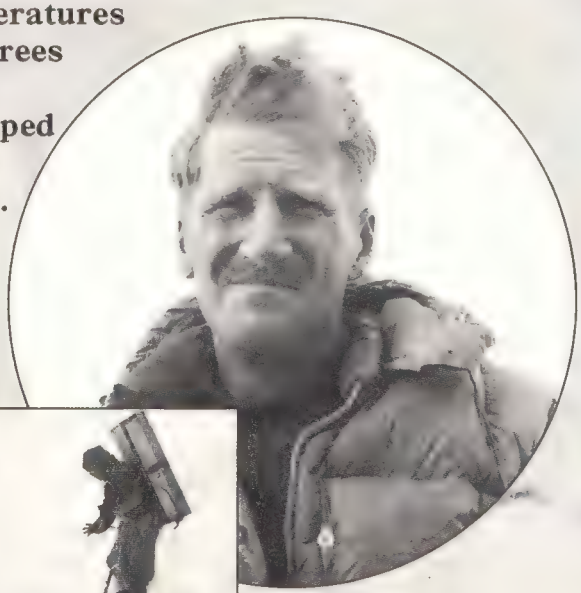
Hillary and Tenzing spent the night there, as the temperature in their little tent sank to 70 degrees below freezing. But at four o'clock they were up, pulling on their clothes and checking their oxygen gear. Hillary's boots had frozen solid and he had to thaw them over a Primus stove. At 6.30 a.m. they were on their way and, by 9 a.m., they were on the South Peak. From there a steep ridge covered in snow led upwards to the summit. Hillary went first, chopping out steps in the snows with his ice-axe. It was an arduous process that went on hour after hour. "As I chipped steps around still another corner, I wondered rather dully how long we could keep it up," Hillary wrote later. "Our original zest had gone now and it was turning more into a grim struggle. I then realized that the ridge ahead, instead of monotonously rising, dropped sharply away and far below I could see the North Col and the Rongbuk Glacier. I looked upwards to see a narrow snow ridge running up to a snowy summit. A few whacks of the ice-axe in the firm snow and we stood on top."

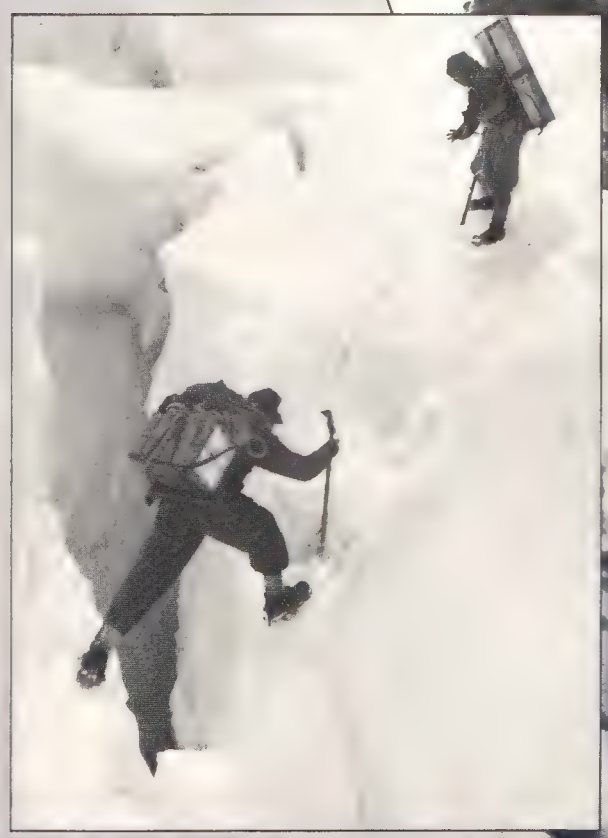
Everest had been conquered. It was 11.30 a.m. on May 29, 1953. "My initial feelings were of relief," Hillary recalled later. "Relief that there were no more steps to cut, no more ridges to traverse and no more humps to tantalize us with hopes of success." The two men, Hillary and Tenzing, thumped each other on the back in sheer delight. Tensing scooped a small hole in the snow in which he placed some chocolate and biscuits as an offering to the gods. Hillary also put a small crucifix, which John Hunt had give him, into the snow. After 15 minutes spent admiring the view and taking photographs, they turned to leave.

The news of their victory reached England just three days later, on the eve of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. As it came over the loudspeakers to the crowds already waiting along the coronation route, loud cheers broke out. No achievement could have been more fitting for the occasion. Everest had been conquered 101 years after its discovery at the 11th attempt. Why had the conquerors done it? Mallory had been asked why he wanted to climb Everest before setting out in 1924 on the expedition from which he never returned. The answer he gave is still the best: "Because it is there."

VICTORY ON EVEREST

Everest was conquered at last at 11.30 a.m. on May 29, 1953, by a team led by John Hunt (right). By then, China had taken Tibet, and Hunt's expedition had to attack by a new route from the south, via Nepal. They spent more than a month notching their way up a treacherous icefall riddled with enormous crevasses. On May 28, Hillary, Sherpa Tenzing and three others established the final camp at 27,900 feet, in temperatures that plunged to 70 degrees below freezing. Next morning, Hillary chopped out the steps in the ice that led to the summit. Tenzing, making his sixth ascent, was with him at the moment of victory.





Two Sherpas cross a deep crevasse high on the mountain. An icefall, which had created enormous chasms, also put the team in constant danger of falling ice-boulders.

Hillary and Tenzing pose in Katmandu (above), and (left) at 27,200 feet, making their way up to Camp IX. The Sherpa wears his oxygen mask.

Sherpa Tenzing, who had been on British expeditions as a porter in the 1930s, and had almost made it to the top before, waves the Union Jack in triumph.

Officer, Coldstream Guards in Egypt, 1882